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On the Front Lines

When the environmental hot line rings, one of the TCEQ's regional offices answers. Field staff are on call day and night for emergencies around the state.

TCEQ regional offices are on the scene to deal with environmental emergencies

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In a state this size, it is essential for the TCEQ to have personnel in all of its 16 regions who are experienced in emergency response and able to react quickly to local environmental problems.

The regional offices are prepared to lead the emergency response and cleanup in their areas, when appropriate. The job requires a knowledge of chemicals, the law, and issues pertaining to air, water, and waste. And it means coordinating with local authorities and assessing for health risks and groundwater contamination.

Calls on the TCEQ environmental hot line come day and night. When the telephone rings, the staffer on call has no advance notice of whether the latest crisis will be a spill of hazardous substances, a train derailment, or a fire at an industrial complex.

The agency receives about 3,000 hot line calls a year from residents, fire departments, or companies responsible for an accident. The agency responds to about 150 of those. Many calls turn out to be the jurisdiction of another agency -- the Railroad Commission, for example -- or accidents minor enough that the responsible party can handle them.

Regional staff mostly go to the scene of spills, which usually occur on land. Spills are considered an emergency because, even on land, chemicals or other hazardous materials can enter a nearby water source -- surface or groundwater. Also, the public could come into contact with the contaminated soil.

The response is handled by the TCEQ regional office closest to the problem, in cooperation with local agencies. After helping to contain the situation, staff make sure the responsible party cleans up the mess or hires a contractor to do cleanup. If more expertise or personnel are needed, the agency's Strike Team will be summoned.

Problems Overflow

Some environmental emergencies occur due to human error; others happen when Mother Nature turns the tables.

That's what happened in 2001 when Tropical Storm Allison dumped up to three feet of rain on the Houston area.

As flood waters swept through the city, the regional office in Houston and the Strike Team mobilized to address developing environmental problems.

Along the Houston Ship Channel, TCEQ staff worked with refineries and chemical plants experiencing unauthorized air emissions due to electrical outages and advised those companies on emergency operational procedures.

Staff also joined the General Land Office (GLO), U.S. Coast Guard, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and contractors in the ship channel to collect stray drums swept from storage areas, along with compressed gas cylinders and other containers filled with chemical compounds. The search teams assembled more than 500 containers at a secure location until analysis and disposal or recycling of the contents could be completed.

Meanwhile, some industrial plants discovered that the floating roofs on storage tanks were sinking, allowing raw



At this loading dock on the Houston Ship Channel, a floating containment boom surrounds an oil slick and an assortment of debris—mostly tires, oiled wood, and 55-gallon drums. The TCEQ worked with other agencies to remove the flood debris and ensure proper disposal.

chemicals to be discharged and spilled onto the ground or mixed with flood waters. TCEQ staff, with the help of the GLO and the Coast Guard, oversaw the installation of booms to contain petroleum-product slicks on the surface of the flood waters until cleanup could occur. Companies also conducted their own mitigation efforts to control emissions and odors.

Once flood waters began to recede, the Houston regional office worked with 34 public water supply systems experiencing contamination problems and needing help to restore operations. Staff provided technical guidance and assistance on issuing boil-water notices and procedures for disinfecting private water wells.

The TCEQ also disseminated information on the environmental and health implications of flood debris, household hazardous waste, and insecticide usage. Staff coordinated with local municipalities and federal agencies on debris collection and disposal of household hazardous waste products.

To help landfills cope with towering volumes of waste resulting from the storm, the Houston office worked to grant temporary permit amendments, allowing the facilities longer hours of operation. Flood management experts held workshops to assist residents in assessing damage to their homes.

Stay Alert

The long days spent dealing with Houston's flooding problems occurred while many members of the Houston office had been flooded out of their own homes. Even the regional office was closed for several days.

No matter the nature of the disaster, regional staffs must be prepared to deal with emergencies -- in whatever form they occur. That's why training is important. Training includes drills in biological, nuclear, and chemical terrorism. During the war with Iraq, the regional offices advised regulated entities on recommended safeguards against potential acts of terrorism.

Teamwork Recognized

The TCEQ has been recognized by the Governor's Office and the Department of Public Safety (DPS) for its work in three flood emergencies last year in Central Texas and the Coastal Bend area. All three events resulted in presidential disaster declarations.

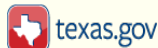
The TCEQ regional offices were involved in assessing damage to critical infrastructure, such as drinking water systems and wastewater treatment plants, and assisted with disposal of large amounts of flood debris and the collection of household hazardous waste.

In his commendation, Gov. Rick Perry applauded TCEQ regional staff for their "contribution, dedication, and commitment." He added: "Their invaluable service during disaster response and recovery efforts made a difference for Texans in need."

DPS Director Thomas A. Davis Jr. said: "Clearly, the actions of the TCEQ have made a significant difference in the protection of lives and property following these numerous disasters."

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